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February 26, 2004

The President  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing regarding the upcoming revision of the Missouri River Master Water Control Manual. I understand that the final environmental impact statement and Master Manual are scheduled to be released in the coming weeks. I urge you to ensure that the Master Manual is based on sound science and adheres to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2000 biological opinion and the 2003 amendment.

As you know, it has been more than 12 years since the Corps of Engineers first began revising the Master Manual in response to court orders in the early 1990s for the Corps to provide for more equitable treatment of upstream states, like South Dakota, in the operation of the river. Over the last decade, the public has been told many times that a final Master Manual is "right around the corner," and I hope that this time those predictions finally hold true.

It is equally important, however, that the Master Manual reflects the needs the Fish and Wildlife Service has identified. For a new Master Manual to be effective, it must do more than simply maintain the status quo. While I have seen reports that there is an effort to provide better drought conservation measures in the new plan, the Corps must also ensure that the Master Manual follows the requirements outlined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in its 2000 and 2003 decisions.

Specifically, the 2000 opinion called for a spring rise and lower summer flows on the river in order to provide essential habitat and ensure the survival of the least tern, the piping plover, and the pallid sturgeon. The 2003 amendment clearly stated that a return to more natural river flows was essential for fish and wildlife habitat, endangered species protection, and river health. Habitat for terns and plovers is declining, absent sufficient spring flows to clear sand bars and nesting areas of woody vegetation. Lower summer flows on the river below Gavins Point Dam are essential to the life cycle of the pallid sturgeon, which require shallow water habitat for spawning.

For too long, the Corps' insistence on operating the river for the benefit of the downstream barge industry has degraded recreation, wildlife, and habitat along the upper reaches of the river. We need a comprehensive change in the way the Missouri River is managed. The science could not be more clear. If the new Master Manual is truly based on sound science, the only option for the Corps is to fully implement the requirements for natural river flows called for by the 2000 biological opinion and the 2003 amendment.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

  
Tom Daschle  
United States Senate

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